

Despite a steady flow of bad news, some reports appeared upbeat. By noontime, both Adan and Sharon had arrived with forward elements of their two reserve armored divisions. Gonen promptly divided the front into three divisional commands: Adan with the 162d Armored Division in the northern sector, Sharon with the 143d Armored Division in the central sector, and Mandler with the 252d Armored Division in the southern sector. With this redeployment, the IDF had theoretically begun a transition from Dovecoat to Rock (its new operational plan)—although events on the battlefield had by now made both defensive plans obsolete.

That afternoon, Elazar received encouragement from Peled, his air chief. The air force had knocked out seven bridges and expected to finish off the remainder by nightfall. In actuality, several of the destroyed or damaged bridges were dummies. The Egyptians, meanwhile, were able to repair the real bridges in quick order. Unaware of this fact but buoyed by the positive reports, Elazar decided to visit Southern Command in person to meet with the theater and division commanders to formulate a plan for the next day.⁷² Taking with him his aide, Colonel Avner Shalev, and the former chief of the General Staff, Yitzak Rabin (of 1967 fame), Elazar arrived at Gonen's forward command post at Gebel Umm Hashiba at 1845. The three men joined Gonen, Adan, and Mandler; Sharon missed the conference entirely, arriving after it had just broken off.

Gonen began the meeting by presenting a review of the war, followed by a summary of the current tactical situation.⁷³ By the next day, Southern Command expected to have 640 tanks, with 530 of them dispersed among three divisions: Adan with 200, Sharon with 180, and Mandler with 150. Intelligence estimates placed the number of Egyptian tanks on the east bank at 400 (when in fact 800 was closer to the mark). In light of the Israelis' low estimate, Gonen recommended a frontal, two-division attack conducted at night against the Egyptian bridgeheads, with Adan crossing to the west bank at Qantara and Sharon doing likewise at Suez City. Adan, who lacked sufficient infantry and artillery, urged a more cautious approach, that of waiting until all the reserves arrived at the front before embarking on a major operation.

Elazar also opted for a cautious course. His plan, however, deviated from an Israeli strategic principle that called for an offensive on one front while assuming a defensive posture on other



An exhausted Israeli soldier after the intensive fighting

Mid-East Wars: The Yom Kippur War



Major General Albert Mandler (standing) briefs the chief of staff on Sunday, 7 October.
Seated left to right are Gonen, Elazar, Adan, Ben Ari, and Rabin.

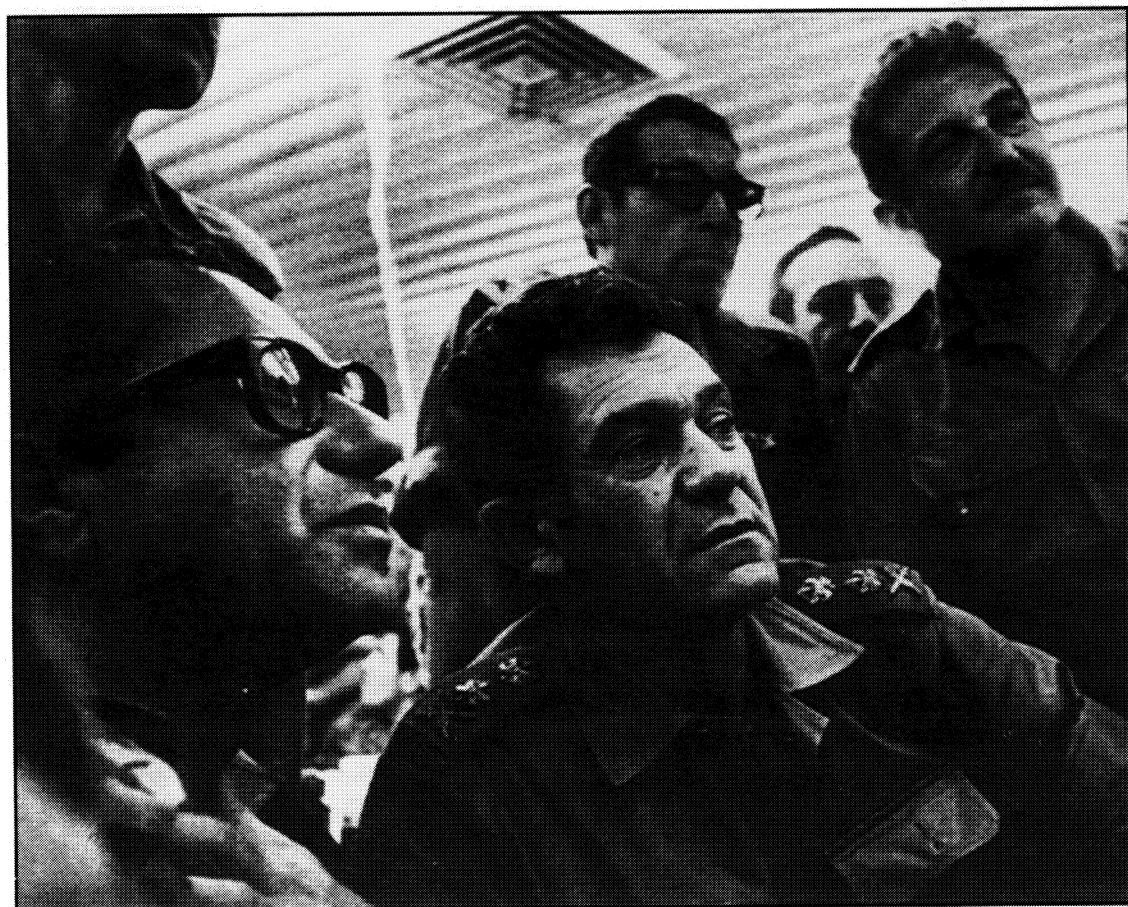
fronts. The Golan clearly was the more critical front at the time and thus required a major counterattack. But rather than adopt a defensive posture in the Sinai, Elazar instead decided on a limited counterattack for the next morning. Adan would attack with the 162d Armored Division southward from the Qantara area, staying at least three to five kilometers east of the canal to avoid the heavy concentration of Egyptian antitank weaponry. Meanwhile, Sharon would remain at Tasa with the 143d Armored Division, acting as a reserve ready to move northward to assist Adan if needed. Should Adan succeed in his mission, Sharon would then head south and attempt to roll up the Egyptian Third Field Army's bridgehead by moving in a similar manner to that of Adan. Meanwhile, Mandler would remain on the defensive, reorganizing his badly battered division, now down to a few dozen tanks, essentially Dan Shomron's brigade and elite infantry units holding the Giddi and Mitla Passes. Elazar was clear and emphatic about two items: under no circumstances would either Adan or Sharon attempt a crossing to the west bank without his approval, and no attempt would be made to approach the strongpoints. The conference finally broke up at 2200.

As Elazar headed toward his helicopter, Sharon suddenly arrived, having missed the entire meeting. Rather than brief him personally, Elazar exchanged a few words with Sharon and then directed him to obtain his instructions from Gonen. Sharon, a maverick general noted for a predilection for bold action, disliked Elazar's cautious approach for the next day. Instead, Sharon recommended a concentrated two-division attack to destroy an Egyptian bridgehead, an idea that appealed to Gonen more than the plan developed by Elazar. Although eager to attempt a

countercrossing, Gonen had his orders, and all he could do was to offer general approval to Sharon's idea without endorsing it. A final decision would have to await developments on the battlefield.

THE FOILED ISRAELI COUNTERATTACK. The day of 8 October 1973 would prove one of the darkest days in the history of the IDF.⁷⁴ The day began with the Egyptians clearly possessing the initiative, but the Israelis were determined to stall the expected Egyptian attack to the passes with their own major countermove. A combination of Israeli mistakes and Egyptian resilience, however, would defeat the Israeli counterattack. At the end of the day, further shocks reached Israeli senior commanders, who now began to grasp the seriousness of their military situation in the Sinai.

After the conference at Gebel Umm Hashiba, Adan hurried back to his division, which was deployed along the Baluza-Tasa road. (See map 3.) The unit was comprised of Colonel Natke Nir's Armored Brigade with seventy-one tanks, Gabi Amir's Armored Brigade with only fifty M-60 tanks, and Aryeh Keren's Armored Brigade (still en route to the area) with sixty-two tanks, for a grand total of 183 tanks. A mechanized infantry brigade with forty-four Super Shermans was expected to join the operation by late morning.⁷⁵ For his attack north to south, Adan planned to lead with Gabi's and Nir's brigades and to keep Keren's as his reserve. For fire support, the



The War of Atonement: October, 1973

Generals Gonen (left), Elazar (middle), and Weizman being briefed

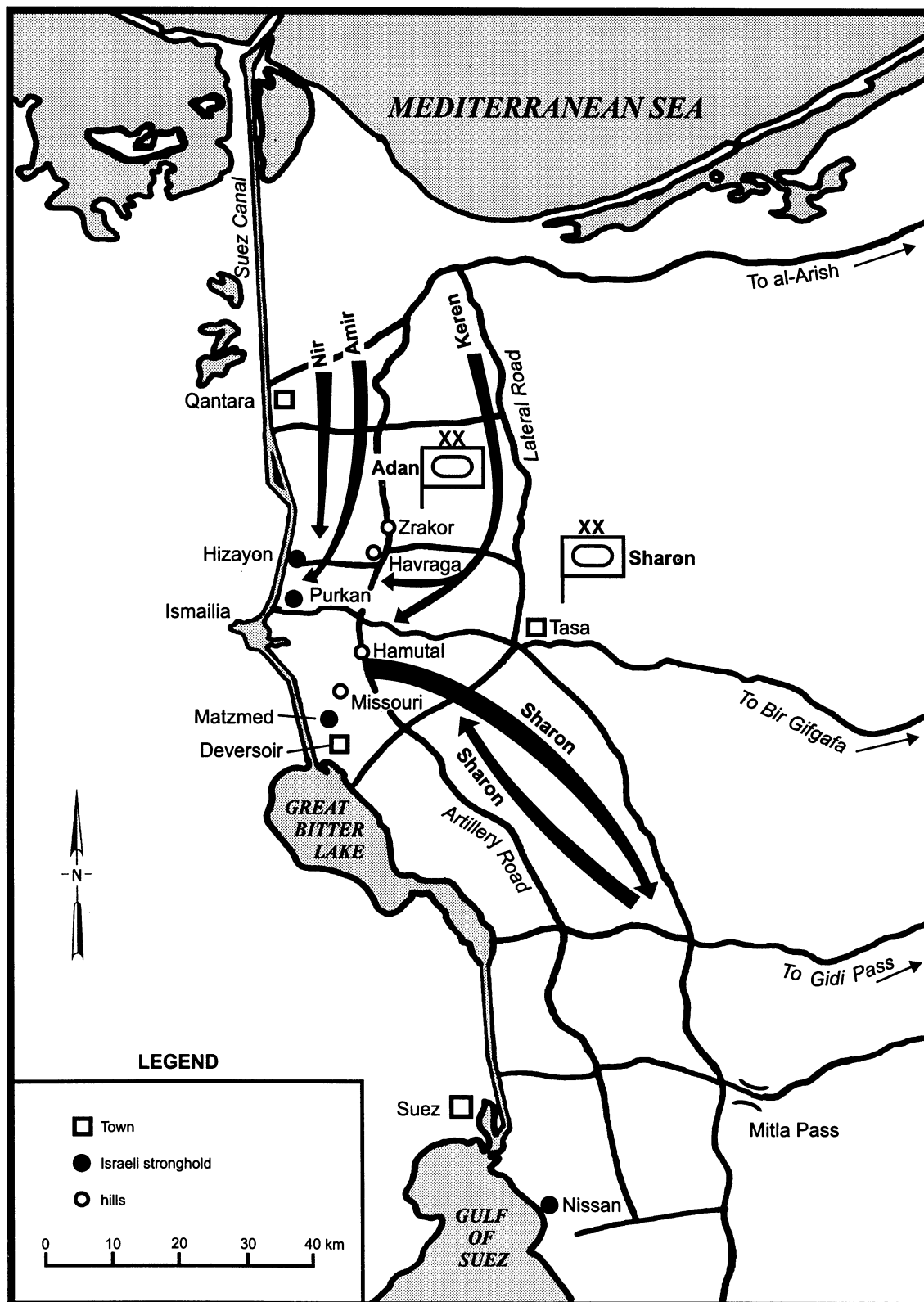
division possessed but a single battery of four self-propelled 155-mm artillery guns along Artillery Road, but Adan expected sufficient air support. This, however, failed to materialize. The Israeli Air Force had concentrated its main effort on the Golan to prevent a collapse of defenses on the strategic terrain that overlooked Israel proper; there, Israel could ill afford to give ground.

In war, battles never conform exactly to plans, even the best prepared ones, and the offensive of 8 October proved no exception. Israeli plans began to unravel even before the commencement of the operation. Shortly after midnight on 8 October, Gonen suddenly changed plans for no apparent reason, which sowed confusion for the remainder of the day. Instead of focusing on clearing the area between Lexicon and Artillery Roads, Gonen wanted Adan to approach the strongpoints at Firdan and Ismailia and prepare for the possibility of crossing to the west bank at Matzmed in the Deversoir area at the northern tip of the Great Bitter Lakes.⁷⁶ Apparently, optimistic reports from the field, coupled with wishful thinking in the rear, spawned the expectation of an imminent Egyptian collapse.

But the change in plans, formulated without precise tactical intelligence, smacked of bravado. At the same time, the Israelis appeared to let their doctrine blindly dictate their tactical and operational objectives. As noted by Adan, "Today it is easy enough to see that we were prisoners of our own doctrine: the idea that we had to attack as fast as possible and transfer the fighting to enemy territory."⁷⁷ The ghost of the Six Day War beckoned a quick resolution to the armed conflict.

Despite Gonen's new order, Adan still planned to avoid the heavy concentration of Egyptian antitank weaponry by keeping his brigades at least three kilometers from the canal. His scheme of maneuver north to south envisaged the following. Amir and Nir would move between Lexicon and Artillery Roads, with Amir on the western avenue and Nir on his left. Keren would move his brigade east of Artillery Road. Each brigade would reach positions designed to link up with the strongpoints of the Bar-Lev Line: Gabi opposite the Hizayon strongpoint at Firdan and the Purkan strongpoint at Ismailia; Nir opposite Purkan; and Keren facing Matzmed or Deversoir at the northern tip of the Bitter Lakes. At this juncture of the operation, the brigade commanders would await orders from Adan as to the feasibility of attempting a crossing operation to the west bank, a decision Elazar had reserved for himself.

A second major change in plans occurred at 0753 or just before the attack. In the Qantara sector, Israeli forces suddenly found themselves engaged in a heavy firefight with the right side of the Egyptian 18th Infantry Division. Brigadier General Fuad 'Aziz Ghali, the division commander, released two companies of T-62 tanks from the 15th Armored Brigade to support his southern brigade.⁷⁸ This unexpected Egyptian assault eastward threatened to outflank Israeli forces in the area. To help contain the Egyptians, Gonen wanted Nir's brigade to stay behind at Qantara under the command of Brigadier General Kalman Magen. This decision left Adan with only Amir's two battalions of twenty-five tanks each—a far cry from the divisional attack expected by Elazar after the previous night's conference. Rather than delay or abort the counterattack, Adan opted to follow Gonen's order, and at 0806, Amir began moving south, even though Keren's brigade was still en route to the area. Adan ordered Amir to be prepared "to link up with the Hizayon and Purkan strongpoints, but to do so only upon a specific order." Keren



would conduct offensive operations against the 16th Infantry Division's bridgehead toward Matzmed.⁷⁹

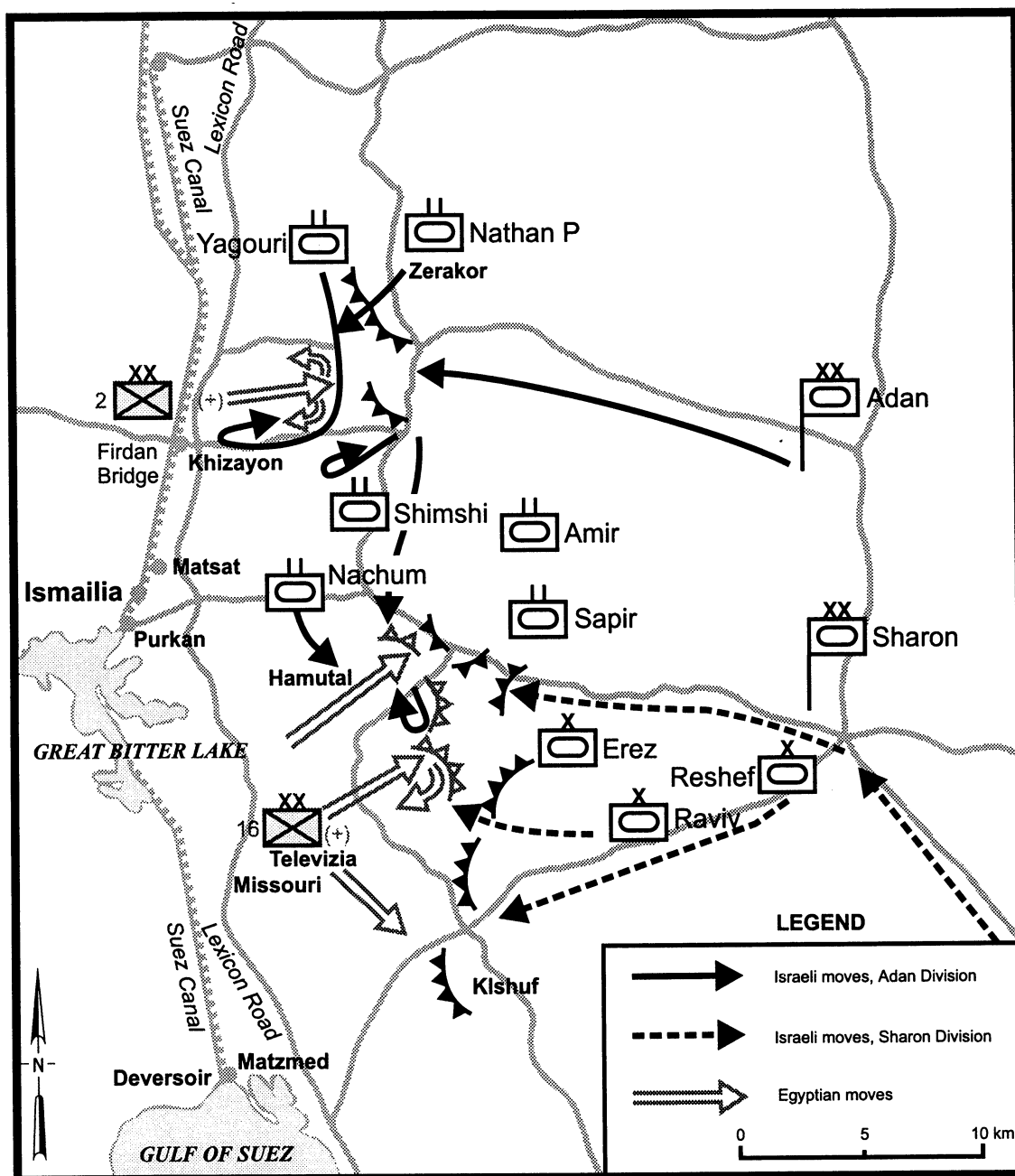
The move south quickly ran amiss. Instead of moving three kilometers from the canal just east of Lexicon, Amir advanced along Artillery Road, completely missing the Egyptian bridgeheads. For his part, Keren moved through Sharon's sector to get into position. As a result of his error in navigation, Amir would eventually have to attack east to west instead of north to south. The frontal, instead of flank, assaults would play directly into the strong Egyptian defenses and cause heavy Israeli casualties, aiding Sadat's war strategy of bleeding the IDF.

Around 0900, advance elements of Amir's brigade reached the plain between Artillery Road and the Firdan bridge without encountering any significant Egyptian opposition. (See map 4.) Awaiting Amir, however, was the Egyptian 2d Infantry Division reinforced with the 24th Armored Brigade from the 23d Mechanized Infantry Division. Two Egyptian infantry brigades formed the first echelon, with a mechanized infantry brigade constituting the second echelon. The 24th Armored Brigade formed the divisional reserve, but Brigadier General Hasan Abu Sa'ada could commit the tank brigade only in the event of an Israeli penetration into the divisional bridgehead.⁸⁰

In the face of a reinforced Egyptian infantry division, Amir's two-battalion force lacked light reconnaissance units, 81-mm self-propelled mortars, and armored infantry. Without air cover and artillery, Amir had to rely on tanks alone to attack defended positions. A malfunction in his direct communications with Adan further complicated matters. Despite all of these problems, Gonen was confident of certain victory. After all, Adan's division had managed to advance virtually unimpeded from north to south. Consequently, Gonen wanted Adan to link up with the strong-point at Hizayon for the purpose of crossing to the west bank and telephoned to Tel Aviv for permission to do so. At 1005, Southern Command even reported the imminent collapse of the Egyptian Army.

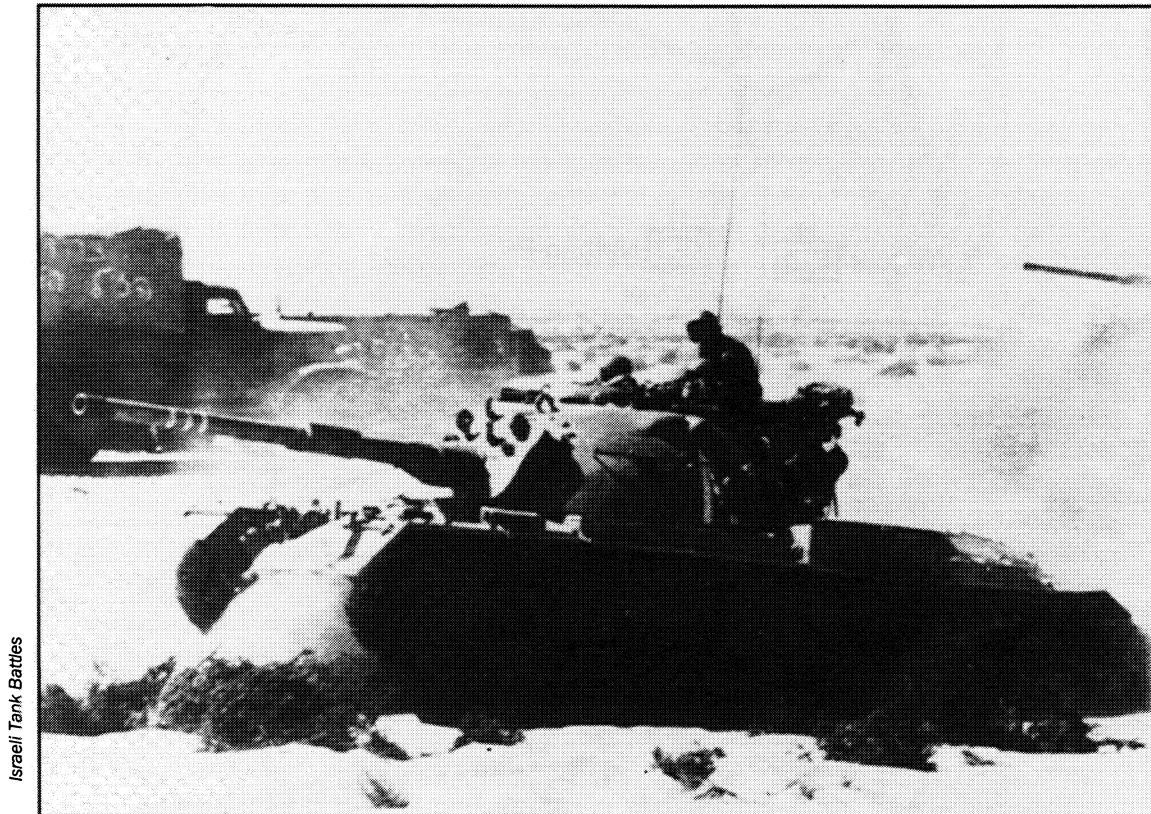
At 0955, choosing to ignore or downplay negative reports reaching him, Gonen reported only positive developments on the battlefield to General Headquarters and requested permission to cross to the west bank. His request found Elazar attending an important meeting of Meir's war cabinet. Rather than excuse himself from the session, the chief of the General Staff preferred to deal with Gonen through his assistant at the Pit. As a result of this peculiar arrangement, some miscommunication occurred during the transmissions between Gonen, the Pit, and Elazar. With each interruption at Meir's cabinet meeting—there were at least five over the span of an hour—Elazar found himself gradually accepting the optimistic reports from Southern Command and approving a countercrossing and release of Sharon to head south—all without ever having talked directly with Gonen!⁸¹ After the war, many would criticize Elazar for operating in such an unorthodox manner.

At 1040, Southern Command ordered Adan to cross to the west bank and gave Sharon the green light to head south toward Suez City. Short of forces, both Adan and Amir appealed to Gonen, asking for Sharon to detach an armored battalion to protect the 162d Armored Division's southern flank. Gonen consented to the request, but Sharon refused to comply—a refusal that would later result in the loss of several critical positions to the Egyptians.⁸²



Map 4. The Israeli counterattack at the Firdan bridge, afternoon, 8 October 1973

While unnecessary haggling took place between two division commanders, a new and unexpected problem beset Amir. Lieutenant Colonel Haim Adini was ready to attack with his battalion, but Lieutenant Colonel Amir Joffe's battalion had to disengage in order to replenish its fuel and ammunition supply. Now, only a tank battalion of some twenty-five tanks would carry out the entire division's attack! At 1100, Adini attacked with two companies in line and a third in reserve. His assault ran into the right side of the Egyptian 2d Infantry Division. At first, success shined upon the Israelis, who broke through the first Egyptians and penetrated to within



Israeli Tank Battles

Israeli M-48 tank racing to counterattack Egyptian armor concentrations near the canal

800 meters of the canal. But then, a torrential downpour of antitank, tank, and artillery fire descended upon Adini's meager force, destroying eighteen of his twenty-five tanks within minutes and wounding Adini along with two company and two platoon commanders. The battalion suffered twenty killed, including two platoon commanders. Making the situation worse, Adan lost communications with Gabi Amir and was therefore initially unaware of the fate of the attack.⁸³

Despite this first setback, the Israelis had the opportunity to regroup to conduct a coordinated three-brigade assault toward Firdan bridge, but this attack proved no more successful than the previous one.⁸⁴ Nir had disengaged at Qantara and, having left one battalion behind, arrived at 1230 in the area of the Firdan bridge with two tank battalions. Nir and Amir held a brief conference to discuss plans for attacking toward the bridge. Meanwhile, Keren moved into the area as well, and Adan ordered him to support Amir and Nir by attacking in the direction of Purkan.

Once again, the situation began unraveling for the Israelis. Gonen, confident of an Egyptian collapse, had already ordered Sharon to vacate the area around Tasa for a move to Suez City. In its tracks, the 143d Armored Division left only a reconnaissance company to hold the critical ridges of Hamadia and Kishuf, but not the hills north of them, such as Hamutal. Sharon's departure suddenly exposed Adan's southern flank at a time when the battle with the Egyptians

was going badly. Keren's Armored Brigade, by default, gained responsibility for Adan's left side. After the war, Adan and Sharon exchanged several verbal salvos over this turn of events.

Meanwhile, the anticipated attack by Nir and Amir faced enormous difficulties. Nir possessed some fifty tanks in two battalions, one under Lieutenant Colonel Asaf Yaguri and the other under Lieutenant Colonel Natan. Gabi Amir, for his part, was in dire need of additional forces to assault entrenched positions. He had virtually lost Adini's entire battalion and had released Natan to replenish this battalion. Suddenly and fortuitously, Lieutenant Colonel Eliashiv Shemshi appeared with his armored (reserve) battalion with twenty-five tanks, two half-tracks, and two jeeps. Shemshi had just arrived on the battlefield in an attempt to join up with Keren's Armored Brigade. Desperate for more armor, Amir quickly received Adan's permission to commandeer Shemshi's battalion to use in coordination with an assault on Firdan bridge. Amir then ordered Shemshi to provide covering fire for Nir's assault on Firdan bridge.

Such "theft" of units and equipment happened frequently during the war, as field commanders responded to immediate threats and urgent orders in the midst of the fog and friction of war. The confusion often left tactical commanders without a clear picture of the battlefield and their particular part in it, and the myriad kinks in execution accentuated each commander's immediate concerns and threats. The fact that the initiative lay squarely in Egyptian hands compounded the confusion and uncertainty and forced Israeli commanders to be more reactive than proactive. As a result, Israeli battalion, brigade, and division commanders experienced difficulty in coordinating their units to counterattack toward what were not always clearly defined and attainable objectives.

Though affected by the stress and chaos of the battlefield, the Israelis, nonetheless, pressed a second attack toward Firdan bridge at 1330. As the first attempt of that morning, this combined attack again lacked proper coordination in the face of overwhelming enemy forces. Natan and Yaguri began to move their battalions at the same time, the former on the right, the latter on the left. Suddenly, heavy Egyptian fire stopped Natan's tank battalion, leaving only Yaguri to proceed with twenty-five tanks. Shemshi, who had no idea of Yaguri's identity, assumed that the battalion belonged to Amir when in fact it formed part of Nir's brigade. The assault thus involved two battalions, from two different brigades, which had no direct communication between their two tactical headquarters. Yaguri charged in line, cavalry style, leaving Shemshi to watch helplessly as fellow Israeli tankers charged into the jaws of disaster.

The second assault on Firdan failed miserably. Warned in advance by intelligence, Brigadier General Abu Sa'ada, the commander of the Egyptian 2d Infantry Division, had prepared his forces for the expected attack. Yaguri now stumbled into a killing zone (*ard qatl*) between the two forward brigades and straight into the Egyptian mechanized infantry brigade. Within minutes, an avalanche of Egyptian fire destroyed eighteen tanks and killed thirty-two Israelis. Yaguri and three other soldiers were captured. By the end of the day, Nir reported fifty-four men missing in action. Among the Egyptians killed were Colonel Fatin Diab and Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim Zeydan, the latter a battalion commander. That evening, the Egyptian military displayed its prize captive, Lieutenant Colonel Asaf Yaguri, on national television to bolster public morale. (A military spokesman in Cairo wrongly identified Yaguri as a brigade commander.) The next day, Egyptian newspapers carried exclusive stories and pictures of Israeli prisoners of war.

Unknown to the Israelis, Operation Badr called for the expansion of the bridgeheads on 8 October to a depth of ten to twelve kilometers, with each field army forming one continuous bridgehead in its sector. To accomplish this mission required a redeployment of forces. In the crossing operation, each Egyptian infantry division placed two infantry brigades forward with the mechanized infantry brigade in the second echelon. Behind these three brigades stood the attached armored brigade. For the widening of the bridgeheads, Operation Badr required the mechanized infantry brigade to push forward between the two infantry brigades, thereby creating a three brigade front, with the attached armor brigade now forming the division's second echelon, or tactical reserve.⁸⁵

Suddenly, during the afternoon of the 8th, the Israelis facing the Egyptian Second and Third Armies found themselves under an artillery barrage and air strikes followed by advancing Egyptian troops determined to expand their bridgeheads. Progress was uneven among the five Egyptian infantry divisions, not all reaching the ten or twelve kilometers necessary to gain control of Artillery Road. In the Second Army sector, however, the 16th Infantry Division proved most successful by occupying the important positions of Missouri, Televizia, Machshir, and Hamutal, the latter overlooking the juncture of Ismailia and Artillery Roads. These four positions would later prove a thorn in the Israeli countercrossing operation to the west bank. In the process, one Egyptian infantry brigade commander, Brigadier General 'Adil Yusri, lost his leg while manning the forward command post.⁸⁶

The Israelis, meanwhile, fought back to regain some of the lost ground.⁸⁷ Keren organized his brigade for an assault on Hamutal hill. While Nahum's battalion provided covering fire, Amir's battalion with twelve tanks and Lieutenant Colonel Dan Sapir with fifteen tanks attacked in a southeasterly direction. Approximately one thousand meters from Hamutal, Egyptian fire killed Sapir, disrupting his battalion's assault. Amir's battalion continued to fight until twilight, but stiff Egyptian resistance forced a pullback of his five remaining tanks.

Just at that moment, an armored brigade under the command of Colonel Haim Erez from Sharon's division returned to the area. By midafternoon, Gonen had realized the gravity of Adan's predicament and, at 1445, ordered Sharon to return to the area he had just vacated. Erez' Armored Brigade arrived in enough time to offer some assistance to Keren, but both brigade commanders failed to coordinate their actions amid all the battlefield confusion. Erez committed a battalion to help Keren, but the battalion commander opted to avoid a major assault with the approach of nightfall and instead committed a tank company in an attempt to retake Hamutal. The company lost three of its eight tanks and failed in its mission.

By the end of the day, growing doubt began to set in among senior Israeli commanders as to Gonen's ability to command the Sinai front. He had pushed Adan to attempt a crossing to the west bank after enticing Elazar to grant his consent. In the end, the Israelis had little to show for their effort on 8 October. Adan's division had suffered heavy losses. Each brigade had lost one battalion, virtually wiped out in frontal assaults against fortified Egyptian positions: Adini's battalion in Amir's brigade; Yaguri's battalion in Nir's brigade; and Joffe's battalion, later transferred to Keren's brigade. Three battalion commanders had been lost too: Dan Sapir killed in action, Haim Adini seriously wounded, and Asaf Yaguri a prisoner of war. Adan, at times, had lost control of his forces and been unable to observe or communicate with them. In terms of combat power, the 162d Armored Division, with the number of its operational tanks dropping



The Heroism of the Egyptian Soldier

Egyptians employing a Soviet-made T-54 in the Sinai



When God Judged and Men Died

Egyptian soldiers using bomb craters as shelters in the Sinai



Knocked-out Israeli tanks near the Lexicon-Tirtur junction

from 183 to approximately 100, now was tantamount to a single brigade. As Adan noted later, “there had been moments when I was no longer sure I had a division.”⁸⁸ Fog and friction had seemingly dominated the battlefield, abetted by a solid Egyptian performance. Gonen, on his part, had prematurely pulled Sharon for a dash to Suez City only to order him back too late. Had Sharon remained in support of Adan in the Tasa area, the Egyptian 16th Infantry Division might have failed to seize its objectives. Furthermore, Adan might have had some success in his attacks on Egyptian positions.

The bad news for the Israelis did not end there. At 2000, or fifty-four hours into the war, the Israeli Air Force reported losses of forty-four planes, a rate that would bring the air force to the dangerous “red line” in just a few days.⁸⁹ Even the Northern Front filed a sobering update: although the Israelis had stopped the Syrian advance and had begun pushing back the attackers in a few places, the Syrians were expected to commit fresh armor the next day. Unfortunately for his reputation, Elazar held his first news conference at 1800 before he had become fully aware of the actual situation on both fronts. Before the media, he bragged how the IDF would soon “break their [the Arabs’] bones,” already claiming to have “begun the destruction of the Egyptian Army.”⁹⁰ These overconfident words would come to haunt him after the war as evidence of unmitigated arrogance.

A number of Israeli historians and analysts have considered the eighth of October the worst day in the short history of the IDF. Numerous mistakes in planning and execution had caused heavy losses in men and equipment, and there had been no tactical or operational gains—a new experience for the Israeli military. On that fateful day, the standard set by the Six Day War and the doctrine of taking the fight to the enemy’s territory as soon as possible compelled Israeli commanders to attempt to defeat the Egyptian Army in quick order. Combined with an arrogant and patronizing attitude toward the Arabs, the Israelis had created a perfect recipe for disaster. As Adan described the situation:

Every IDF commander was deeply imbued with the idea that we would have to cross at some point; this was an organic part of the IDF’s doctrine of transferring the war to enemy territory and terminating it there quickly . . . Virtually no one on the Israeli side doubted that the war would be decided only after we had crossed to the west bank and destroyed the main enemy force. The

crossing idea was like some siren song, beckoning the commanders on, teasing them to dare and reach for the prize.⁹¹

The IDF, driven in some measure by overweening pride, underestimated its thrice-defeated foe, and many officers assumed a quick and easy victory would ensue from their cavalry-like counterattacks. The subsequent rude awakening jarred the Israeli military, as evidenced by Gonen's terse comment at day's end: "It's not the Egyptian Army of 1967."⁹²

For the Egyptians, the eighth of October, in sharp contrast to the Israeli experience, proved "the decisive day of the crossing operation."⁹³ The Egyptian Armed Forces had defeated a division-size Israeli counterattack, thereby ensuring the success of the first phase of Operation Badr. Euphoria spread throughout the Egyptian High Command. Despite clear tactical successes, however, not all had worked perfectly for the Egyptians. During the morning and afternoon of 8 October, Shazli, the chief of the General Staff, had personally visited the 2d and 7th Infantry Divisions on the east bank to gather a firsthand assessment of the tactical situation and to congratulate the troops on their accomplishments. Two concerns surfaced that day. First, Israeli air strikes had damaged so many bridge sections that the Egyptians had lost the equivalent of three heavy bridges of the original twelve. These losses left only four heavy bridges in reserve and one operating for each division, raising some concern for supply in the weeks ahead, should losses continue at the same rate.⁹⁴ Second, in a few sectors, the infantry divisions had failed to reach their tactical objectives, falling short by several kilometers. As a result of these failures, both field army commanders, Major General Sa'ad Ma'mun for Second Army and Major General 'Abd al-Mun'im Wassel for Third Army, pressed for the implementation of an operational pause to consolidate their bridgeheads and to reorganize their forces before contemplating an offensive to the passes.⁹⁵

Shazli's counterpart in Israel also journeyed to the front. To gain a firsthand appreciation of the extent of reverses in the Sinai, Elazar visited Southern Command. Just after midnight on 9 October, he and Dayan met with senior field commanders at Gebel Umm Hashiba to assess the military situation. Now, a modicum of realism and reassessment descended upon the military leadership, brought about by the harsh realities of the battlefield. Elazar wanted to suspend offensive operations in the Sinai for at least twenty-four hours while the IDF focused their effort on finishing off the Syrians. With only 400 tanks left in the Sinai, Israel could ill afford to wage major offensives on two fronts simultaneously, and the chief of the General Staff instructed his subordinates to avoid any battles of attrition. Reorganization and conservation were the top priorities; the countercrossing to the west bank would take place at a later date.⁹⁶ Now, a heightened concern for casualties began to emerge within the Israeli senior command.

TURNING THE TIDE. Meanwhile, the magnitude of success achieved by the Egyptian Armed Forces during the first three days of the war had pleasantly surprised senior officials in Egypt, and confidence soared among the political and military elite. Pressures from various sources mounted on Sadat to exploit the favorable tactical situation by moving immediately to the Sinai passes. More concerned about political ends than military means, Sadat remained unyielding and refused to countenance a quick expansion of the war.

At 0130 on 9 October, Heikal broached the subject of the passes with Sadat, who dismissed the notion out of hand: "As I told Hafez Asad, territory isn't important; what is important is to exhaust the enemy. I don't want to make the mistake of pushing too fast just for the sake of

occupying more territory. We must make the enemy bleed.” Nonetheless, Sadat gave Heikal permission to call Ahmad Ismail. At 0300, Heikal telephoned Center Ten and spoke with Shazli, who declined to wake the war minister from his sleep and politely stated his own opposition to the idea. Finally, at 0715 that same morning, Heikal talked with Ahmad Ismail, who unequivocally supported Shazli’s position.⁹⁷

The issue failed to die there, however. Later that morning, on 9 October, the fourth day of the war, a group of senior officers also approached Ahmad Ismail, advocating an immediate offensive to the passes without an operational pause. These officers believed that stopping military operations would result in the transfer of the initiative to the Israelis, who could then attack at their leisure. Dismissing their arguments, the cautious war minister underscored his desire to continue inflicting heavy damage on the Israelis. Fighting on the defense, he felt, best achieved that objective. Going to the passes was thus out of the question—for the time being.⁹⁸

The most important voice in the debate among senior Egyptian commanders was that of Anwar Sadat, and on 8 October, a day earlier than the above meeting, Ahmad Ismail had already received marching orders from the president—implement an operational pause.⁹⁹ Sadat wanted time to conduct secret diplomacy with the United States and also sought to inflict heavy casualties on the Israelis, making the war a costly one for them. In this, Sadat remained constant.

Even the Soviets encountered a stubborn Sadat on the issue of a wider war. Colonel General Mahmut Gareev, a former senior Russian military adviser in Egypt, noted how Sadat had consistently told Soviet advisers that he wanted to gain land east of Suez, even as little as “ten centimeters,” in order to draw world attention to the Arab-Israeli problem. Vladimir Vinogradov, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo from 1970 to 1974, recalled that when in the middle of the war he raised the issue of more Russian military support for Syria, Sadat curtly responded: “Let it [Syria] go on the defensive and wage guerrilla warfare. Our main goal is to knock out as many enemy force[s] as possible.”¹⁰⁰ As Sadat had outlined in his strategic directive of 5 October, inflicting heavy casualties on the Israelis constituted a key military objective of the war, and the Egyptian leader remained firmly wedded to that goal. Still, despite his political goals, Sadat would learn that he could not ignore the dynamic of the battlefield in the Sinai and on the Golan.

The ninth of October, nonetheless, still fit nicely into Sadat’s war strategy of inflicting maximum casualties. All along the front, the Egyptians conducted probing attacks to expand their bridgeheads, and Israeli commanders often responded with costly counterattacks. In Sharon’s sector, for example, the 16th Infantry Division attempted on 9 October to seize some important ridges; in consequence, Brigadier General Shafik Mirti Sedrak, commander of the 3d Mechanized Infantry Brigade, lost his life while attacking with his right battalion. Sharon, who opposed Elazar’s decision to move onto the defensive and reconstitute, decided to retaliate and ordered a number of counterattacks throughout the day in clear violation of Elazar’s intent to avoid battles of attrition. In response to Sharon’s moves, Mu’nim, the commander of the Egyptian Second Army, released a tank battalion from the 14th Armored Brigade to help Brigadier General ‘Abd Rab al-Nabi Hafiz, the commander of the 16th Infantry Division, thwart penetrations. Meanwhile, Colonels Amnon Reshef’s Armored Brigade and Tuvia Raviv’s Armored Brigade led several attacks to gain control of positions at Hamutal, Televiza, and Machshir, but to no avail. Lieutenant Colonel Shaul Shalev, a battalion commander from Reshef’s brigade, lost his life that day. By nightfall, Sharon had lost some fifty tanks, a number comparable to that of Adan’s

losses the previous day, and without any gains, although Reshef did extricate the garrison from the Purkan strongpoint.¹⁰¹

Upon learning of Sharon's brash action, Elazar became livid. But rather than remove Sharon, a controversial but innovative commander with political connections to the opposition party, Elazar opted to replace Gonen. Though a hero in the Six Day War, Gonen lacked the character and temperament to be a theater commander. Furthermore, his two subordinates, Adan and Sharon, had once been his superiors, which further complicated matters. Gonen's worst flaw, however, was that he remained preoccupied with current tactical events. As Elazar remarked later: "I think about tomorrow . . . That's my job. Whoever's shooting now, neither the front commander nor I can help anymore. That's a divisional commander's problem. I'm constantly telling him: Shmulik [Gonen], let's talk about what will happen tomorrow."¹⁰² Gonen had failed to transition from being a tactical to an operational commander.

Part of Gonen's problem was that the Egyptians maintained the initiative—something the Israelis found unfamiliar and unsettling. But Elazar could not avoid the critical issue of competent command, and he decided to replace Gonen with former chief of the General Staff, Haim Bar-Lev. Although beset with his own share of problems in controlling Sharon, Bar-Lev brought a firmer hand to the Sinai theater. To avoid the appearance of firing Gonen, Elazar retained the general as a deputy to the front commander when Bar-Lev assumed command on 10 October. The next major round in the struggle would come in less than four days.

By 10 October, both the Egyptians and the Israelis had settled into their own version of an operational pause. During this phase in the war, Egyptian forces conducted probing attacks designed to expand their bridgeheads to at least the Artillery Road, while the Israelis, for the most part, proceeded to foil these efforts. Elazar suspended offensive operations based on military necessity—the IDF could ill afford launching simultaneous offensives on two fronts, and the Israelis were not yet finished with the Syrians. Although Northern Command had pushed the Syrian Army off the Golan Heights by 10 October, the Israelis wished to finish off the Syrian Armed Forces before turning to the Sinai front. Consequently, on 10 October, the Israeli cabinet approved an offensive into Syria with the goal of moving within artillery range of Damascus by capturing Sasa. With this drive, the Israelis hoped to take Syria effectively out of the war by forcing Asad to accept a cease-fire. The attack began at 1100 on 11 October.

Despite the Egyptians' strong position, Sadat could not, for political reasons, ignore the military situation on the Golan. The Syrian inability to capture the Golan Heights and their forced retreat back into Syria had complicated matters for the Egyptian president. At the beginning of the war, Syria threatened Israel directly, forcing the IDF to focus their main effort on the northern front. By 9 October, however, the military situation was becoming desperate for the Syrian Armed Forces, and pleas for help from Damascus were becoming more pronounced, eventually compelling Sadat to make a tough decision.

On 11 October, a special emissary from Asad arrived in Cairo appealing to the Egyptians to launch a major attack toward the passes to relieve Israeli pressure on the Golan front. Sadat was pressed to respond positively. To abandon Syria would have undermined his credibility in the Arab world after the war, and Egypt relied heavily on financial assistance from oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Sadat was therefore compelled, out of political and economic necessity, to demonstrate solidarity with the Arab cause against Israel.



Israeli Centurion tank from Nir's Brigade moving on Egyptian commandos, 12 October

Whatever the exact set of motivations, Sadat decided to heed Asad's plea for help, a decision that significantly altered the course of the war in the Sinai. In the early hours of 12 October, Sadat ordered an offensive toward the passes for the next day with the purpose of deflecting Israeli attention from the Syrian front. No forces from the five infantry divisions would participate in the attack; their mission remained to consolidate their bridgeheads on the east bank. At 0630 on 13 October, the attack forces would come from the mechanized infantry and armored divisions. Ahmad Ismail directed his two field army commanders to commence an offensive employing armored and mechanized brigades (taken from the Egyptians' operational reserves).¹⁰³

Sadat's order sparked serious opposition at Center Ten and at both field army headquarters. Shazli and both field army commanders led the argument against the attack, attempting to convince Ahmad Ismail that the time had passed for moving outside the air defense umbrella. But the war minister had no choice but to obey his supreme commander. Ahmad Ismail did agree to postpone the offensive twenty-four hours to 0630 on 14 October, thereby hoping to obtain the additional time necessary to enhance the plan's chance of success.¹⁰⁴

As anticipated by many senior Egyptian officers, the attack on the morning of 14 October proved an unmitigated disaster—a drive attempted too late and with insufficient forces (see map 5). Using four axes of advance, Egyptian forces composed of one mechanized infantry and four armored brigades attacked the Israelis over open terrain with the sun in their eyes. IDF forces waited in defensive positions, armed with an undisclosed number of recently arrived sophisticated antitank TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles from the United States. On 11 October, the IDF had established a special course for rapidly training instructors on the use of the TOWs.¹⁰⁵ This gave them ample time to train units for action by 14 October.

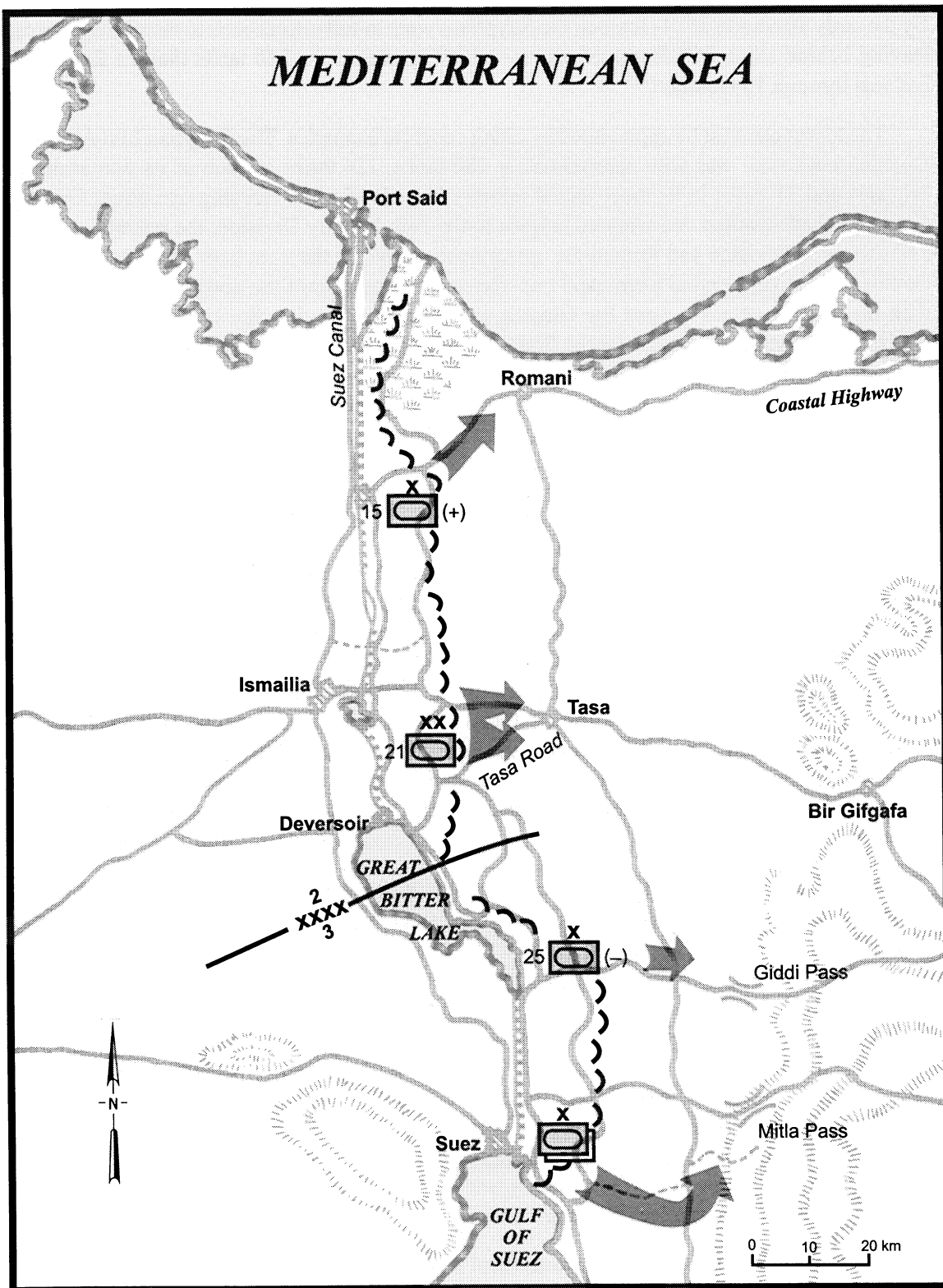
By the early afternoon of 14 October, the Egyptians were in full retreat back to their bridgeheads, leaving behind some 250 destroyed tanks—which surpassed the 240 tanks that the Egyptians had lost through 13 October!¹⁰⁶

The losses can best be appreciated by citing concrete examples. The Egyptian 21st Armored Division began the war with approximately 280 tanks, 124 tanks in each of its two armored brigades and 31 tanks in its mechanized infantry brigade. For the crossing operation, General Command had attached one armored brigade to the 16th Infantry Division; the remainder of the 21st Armored Division had formed the operational reserve on the west bank. To conduct the 14 October offensive, General Command transferred the remainder of the division to the east bank with the order to attack toward Bir Gifgafa. By the end of the day, the 1st Armored Brigade, which had experienced combat for the first time, had only sixty-six tanks (47 percent of its tanks having been lost), whereas the 14th Armored Brigade, already combat seasoned from the crossing operation, possessed only thirty-nine tanks (with 69 percent of its force now lost). Fortunately for the division, the 18th Mechanized Infantry Brigade saw no action that day and as a result maintained its full complement of thirty-one tanks.¹⁰⁷ The 21st Armored Division had thus lost over 50 percent of its tank force by the end of 14 October (down to 136 from a prewar figure of 280 tanks).

The Egyptian 3d Armored Brigade from the elite 4th Armored Division illustrates another example of the lethality of the Sinai battlefield. Assigned to the Third Army's operational reserve, the brigade spent the first week of the war in relative calm on the west bank. Then, it crossed the Suez Canal during the night of 12–13 October and launched its fateful attack toward Mitla Pass on the 14th into the waiting arms of the Israeli forces. Starting with 124 T-55 tanks, the Egyptian brigade lost sixty tanks, nine armored personnel carriers, and virtually all of its artillery pieces in less than eight hours. By midafternoon, the brigade had retreated back into the 19th Infantry Division's bridgehead with its combat power essentially down to that of two tank battalions.¹⁰⁸ Overall, the Egyptians never recovered from this major military setback, and it remained for the IDF to exploit this sudden turn of events.

With this Egyptian defeat, Israeli commanders quickly grasped that the tide of war had shifted in their favor. That night, Elazar called Meir with the good news and gave his assessment of the new strategic situation facing Israel in the Sinai. “Golda, it will be all right. We are back to ourselves and they [the Egyptians] are back to themselves.”¹⁰⁹ Egyptian losses supported Elazar's optimistic appraisal, for Israeli intelligence estimates placed the number of Egyptian tanks destroyed at 280—a loss that shifted the balance of combat power to Israel.¹¹⁰ Events would prove that the initiative had clearly passed to the IDF, and, as a result, the Egyptian Armed Forces would display some of the weaknesses that they had exhibited in their poor performance in the Six Day War. Yet, despite much reason for optimism, the Israeli political and military leadership would learn, *again*, that the Egyptians had not completely reverted to their old selves. Rather, the Egyptian Armed Forces would once again demonstrate their new-found combat mettle, thereby creating more surprises for Israel in the latter part of the war.

The 14th of October, though an unequivocal Israeli military success, carried with it a painful side for Israel. After some procrastination, partly out of a desire not to alarm the public, Elazar finally authorized the first official release to the media of casualty figures: 656 known dead Israeli soldiers in the first eight days of fighting, among them Major General Avraham Mandler, the



Map 5. Sinai front, Egyptian attack, 14 October 1973



Mid-East Wars: The Yom Kippur War

A tank's-eye view during an Israeli holding action in north Sinai

commander of the 252d Armored Division, killed by an artillery shell the day before. By now, many Israelis on the home front had realized that all was not well in the war, but this first public acknowledgment of the numbers killed gave concrete form to the extent of the human tragedy so far. In the 1956 and 1967 wars, both of less than a week's duration, newspapers had published the names of those killed in battle after the end of hostilities. This time, however, military censors had instructions to prevent the publication of any obituaries submitted by bereaved families until the end of the war. Citing the need for secrecy at a news conference, Dayan admonished the nation to delay its mourning until the resolution of the armed struggle: "We are in the midst of war, and we can't give public expression at this time to our deep grief for the fallen."¹¹ His words underscored the seriousness of the war, and Israel's national will focused on winning the conflict before confronting its tragic dimensions.

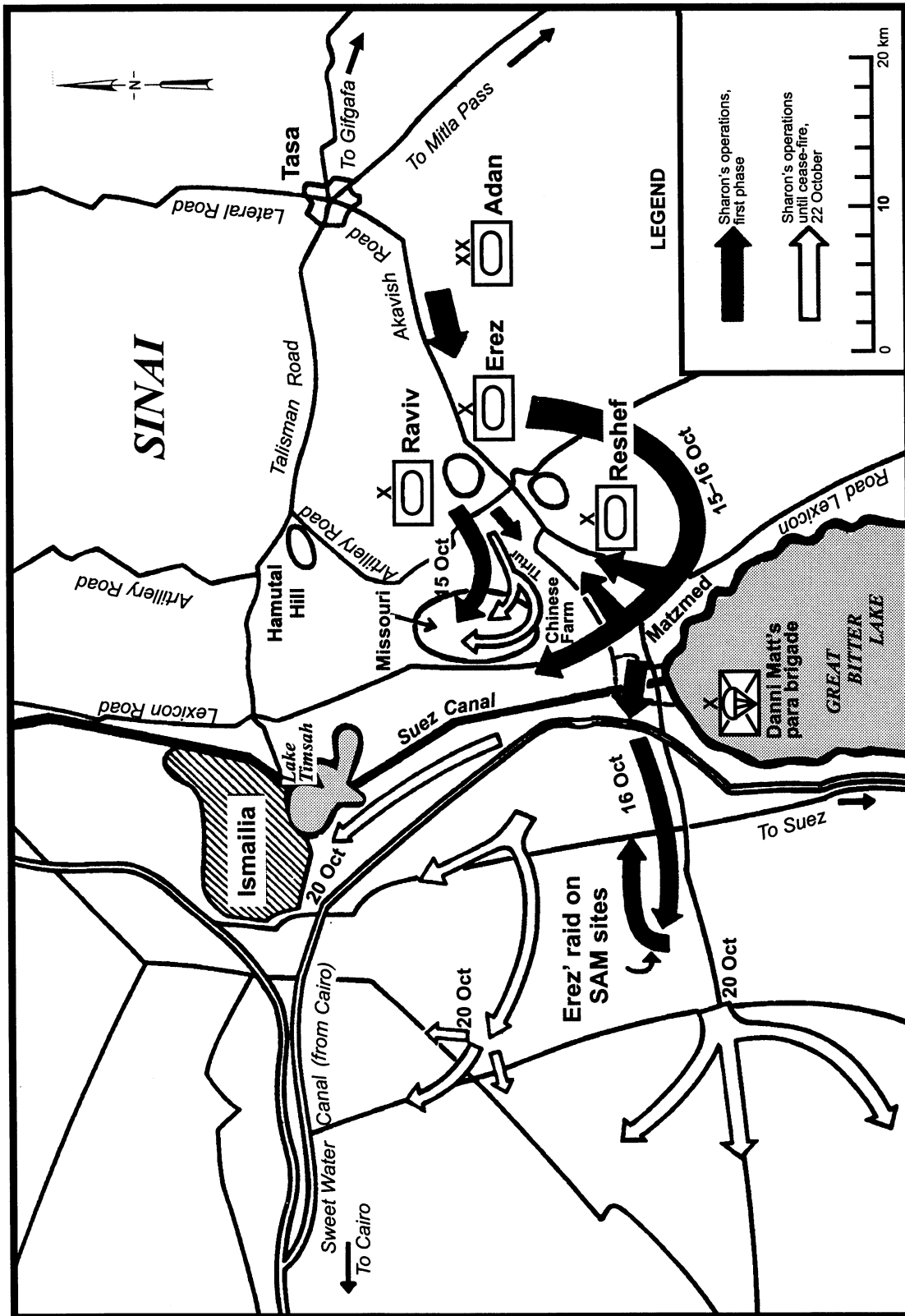
THE ISRAELI RESURGENCE. The sheer magnitude of the military defeat shocked, stunned, and demoralized the Egyptian High Command and energized the IDF. While Egyptian field officers attempted to regain their composure and regroup their battered forces, senior Israeli commanders prepared to take advantage of the new strategic situation in the Sinai. Late in the evening on 14 October, Elazar approached the cabinet, seeking approval for a crossing to the west bank—an operation called Stouthearted Men. Confirmation came at approximately 0030 on 15 October. The operation began with high hopes of achieving a quick victory on the battlefield.

Stouthearted Men called for three Israeli armored divisions to cross at Deversoir on the northern tip of the Great Bitter Lakes and encircle the Egyptian Third Army by surrounding Suez City, thereby cutting off the Egyptian troops on the east bank from their supply bases.¹¹² Israeli intelligence had estimated that the Egyptians had lost between 250 and 280 tanks on 14 October, which left them with only 700 tanks operational on both banks of the Suez. Southern Command possessed roughly the same number of tanks divided into four divisions: Sharon 240, Adan 200, Magen 140, and Sasson 125. Despite a roughly equal number of tanks on both sides, the Israelis could concentrate their armor at the crossing site of Deversoir, where the Egyptians had positioned the southern flank of the 16th Infantry Brigade. To meet the Israeli effort, Brigadier General Abd Rab al-Nabi Hafiz, the Egyptian commander of the 16th Infantry Division, could rely only on his divisional reserve and elements from the battered 21st Armored Division.

For the crossing operation, Sharon's 143d Armored Division would secure both sides of the Suez Canal and the two roads, Akavish and Tirtur, that led to the crossing site on the east bank (see map 6). Adan would then cross over with his 162d Armored Division to destroy the Egyptian air defense system, thus allowing the Israeli Air Force to provide needed ground support as well as threaten Cairo. If all went according to plan, the 252d Armored Division, now under the command of Brigadier General Kalman Magen (who replaced the fallen Mandler on 13 October), would cross over and relieve Sharon on the west bank. Adan would then race south to capture Suez City, thereby surrounding Third Army. Sharon, meanwhile, would provide flank protection for the dash south. To support the effort, Elazar planned to insert a paratroop force by helicopter to secure the key position of Gebel Ataka.

Based on the assumption that the Egyptians had returned to their form of 1967, Operation Stouthearted Men optimistically planned for a one-day crossing of the Suez Canal and for another day to conduct a lightning dash to Suez City to encircle Third Army. This forty-eight-hour timetable was completely unrealistic. Again, the Egyptians exhibited unexpected resilience, even when confronted with Israeli units in their operational rear. Again, the Israelis discovered that this was not the Egyptian Army of 1967.

Sharon, as noted, had received the mission of securing the access routes and crossing site. To draw Egyptian attention away from Deversoir, Raviv's Armored Brigade would launch a diversionary attack toward Televizia and Hamutal. Meanwhile, Reshef's Armored Brigade, with the mission of securing the crossing site and the route to it, would embark on a southwesterly route south of Tirtur and Akavish Roads. Once on Lexicon Road and heading north, Reshef planned to secure Deversoir with one force, push another force north and northeast to widen the crossing site, and send a third force eastward to open Tirtur and Akavish Roads. To facilitate the movement of troops and equipment across the Suez Canal, Southern Command hoped to capture some Egyptian bridges intact and to bring forward its own heavy bridge, pulled by a tank company. After Reshef secured Deversoir, Colonel Danni Matt's 600 paratroopers would cross over to the west bank during the night of 15–16 October, supported by a tank company from Haim Erez' Armored Brigade. The remainder of Erez' brigade would tow a preconstructed bridge to Deversoir, using Akavish Road. Once in place, the remainder of Erez' brigade would cross in rapid fashion to secure the bridgehead on the west bank. Sharon's command and control would stretch from Raviv, east of Artillery Road, to Matt, west of Deversoir.



Map 6. Surprise Suez crossing by Sharon's division, night, 15 October 1973